

BEE-HUNTERS OF TIMOR.

THE bees'-wax is an important and valuable product, formed by the wild bees (*Apis dorsata*), which build huge honeycombs, suspended in the open air from the under side of the lofty branches of the highest trees. These are of a semicircular form, and often three or four feet in diameter. I once saw the natives take a bees' nest, and a very interesting sight it was. In the valley where I used to collect insects, I one day saw three or four Timorese men and boys under a high tree, and, looking up, saw on a very lofty horizontal branch three large bees' combs. The tree was straight and smooth-barked, and without a branch, till at seventy or eighty feet from the ground it gave out the limb which the bees had chosen for their home. As the men were evidently looking after the bees, I waited to watch their operations. One of them first produced a long piece of wood, apparently the stem of a small tree or creeper, which he had brought with him, and began splitting it through in several directions, which showed that it was very tough and stringy. He then wrapped it in palm-leaves, which were secured by twisting a slender creeper round them. He then fastened his cloth tightly round his loins, and producing another cloth wrapped it round his head, neck, and body, and tied it firmly round his neck, leaving his face, arms, and legs completely bare. Slung to his girdle he carried a long thin coil of cord; and while he had been making these preparations one of his companions had cut a strong creeper or bush-rope, eight or ten yards long, to one end of which the wood-torch was fastened, and lighted at the bottom, emitting a steady stream of smoke. Just above the torch a chopping-knife was fastened by a short cord.

The bee-hunter now took hold of the bush-rope just above the torch, and passed the other end round the trunk of the tree, holding

one end in each hand. Jerking it up the tree a little above his head, he set his foot against the trunk, and, leaning back, began walking up it. It was wonderful to see the skill with which he took advantage of the slightest irregularities of the bark or obliquity of the stem to aid his ascent, jerking the stiff creeper a few feet higher when he had found a firm hold for his bare foot. It almost made me giddy to look at him as he rapidly got up—thirty, forty, fifty feet above the ground; and I kept wondering how he could possibly mount the next few feet of straight smooth trunk. Still, however, he kept on with as much coolness and apparent certainty as if he were going up a ladder, till he got within ten or fifteen feet of the bees. Then he stopped a moment, and took care to swing the torch (which hung just at his feet) a little toward these dangerous insects, so as to send up the stream of smoke between him and them. Still going on, in a minute more he brought himself under the limb, and, in a manner quite unintelligible to me, seeing that both hands were occupied in supporting himself by the creeper, managed to get upon it.

By this time the bees began to be alarmed, and formed a dense buzzing swarm just over him, but he brought the torch up closer to him, and coolly brushed away those that settled on his arms or legs. Then, stretching himself along the limb, he crept toward the nearest comb, and swung the torch just under it. The moment the smoke touched it, its color changed in a most curious manner from black to white, the myriads of bees that had covered it flying off and forming a dense cloud above and around. The man then lay at full length along the limb, and brushed off the remaining bees with his hand, and then, drawing his knife, cut off the comb at one slice close to the tree, and, attaching the thin cord to it, let it down to his companions below. He was all this time enveloped in a crowd of angry bees, and how he bore their stings so coolly, and went on with his work at that giddy height so deliberately, was more than I could understand. The bees were evidently not stupified by the smoke or driven away far by it, and it was impossible that the small stream from the torch could protect his whole body when at work. There were three other combs on the same tree, and all were successively taken, and furnished the whole party with a luscious feast of honey and young bees, as well as a valuable lot of wax.

After two of the combs had been let down, the bees became rather numerous below, flying about widely and stinging viciously. Several got about me, and I was soon stung, and had to run away, beating them off with my net and capturing them for specimens. Several of them followed me for at least half a mile, getting into my hair and persecuting me most pertinaciously, so that I was more astonished than ever at the immunity of the natives. I am inclined to think that slow and deliberate motion, and no attempt at escape, are perhaps the best safeguards. A bee settling on a passive native probably behaves as it would on a tree or other inanimate substance, which it does not attempt to sting. Still they must often suffer, but they are used to the pain, and learn to bear it impassively, as without doing so no man could be a bee-hunter.

